

Gerhard Mack

Notes on the Tokyo photographs of Stefan Banz

"Tokyo Bites" is what Stefan Banz calls the photos he took in the Japanese metropolis. Bites - the word might refer to those snacks served to make a reception more pleasant, to tickle our taste buds, to open and keep tempting our senses for the rest of the evening; but bites can also denote those bites we inflict on each other in moments of intense pleasure, to perhaps increase our arousal by adding a pinch of pain. Banz clearly has both these meanings in mind: visual appetisers to whet our hunger for the city as well as love bites that sink into the city's flesh like teeth, challenging and tender, quick and furtive, always keen to find its overlooked, unprotected spots.

This is the playful passion of a love that takes us by surprise, captivating us the moment we first get about the Japanese megalopolis; the intoxication with impressions that carries off our senses, that makes us lose our sense of direction, that frightens us yet keeps leading us back to the charms of this mysterious temptress. Stefan Banz turns the innocence of this unexpected affair into his strategy: to experience the city and to portray it in pictures both fleeting and lasting. Each thing he sees arouses his interest, to each detail he devotes the same energy, the same unprejudiced curiosity. Nothing is treated with indifference or even contempt. The less striking some minute pore of the city's body, the more intimate the devotion that colours the photographer's gaze. The more familiar its attributes seem to him, that is, the more they re-mind him of things already seen, the more open he is to the various ways in which they adorn this special, unfamiliar body. That is an attitude that cannot be taken for granted in somebody who lives in Lucerne and has, for decades, had to endure the throngs of Japanese tourists that keep invading it summer after summer to tick Lake Lucerne off their European itinerary. From this perspective, Japan is loaded with hackneyed cliché. It is clear that the photographer has not forgotten this, but here he shows us a Japan that is fresh and new.

Already the second photo in the book presents a motif typical of those ink drawings and woodcuts that have done much to define our notion of the Japanese pictorial tradition since the late 19th century: water lilies, a pond, birds and a temple summarise the landscape of the Japanese locus amoenus, one of the country's most striking cultural achievements. Yet this particular picture is painted in the garish colours that we have come to expect from tourist brochures, and what is more, it is painted on the façade of an industrially-built, prefab house, the idyllic fantasy harshly dispelled by rusty steel beams, a cooling unit reminding us of the sultry Japanese summers and a patch of the city reflected in the window in the upper right. What unprepared western eyes listlessly accept as belonging into the distant realm of the sublime is revealed a banal piece of urban decoration whose elements just happened to be so crudely combined by the high-power dynamism of constant change. Tokyo is an immense collage of diverse images that carry their origins in themselves, like the people that cross each other's paths here, coming from all walks of life and meeting in a narrow space without ever getting into each other's way - the people, simply, that make up the colourful kaleidoscope of a society. Just as they combine individuality and anonymity in constantly changing proportions, the elements of this city conserve their characteristics, each remaining true to itself while continuously mixing with others to form ever-changing images.

The gaze that focuses on these fleeting mixtures is that of a flaneur caressing his city, blending its façades, objects and people into fragile impressions and flattering it with his attention. Taking a picture of the back of a night club, he interprets the tension between the ventilation system and a tree as forming a well-weighted composition. On a playground, he discovers a diminutive stone Buddha. He has women on billboards observe the people passing by down below in the streets. He makes photographs, blinds, windows and reflections intersect to create the sense of a surreal space. He transfigures a pair of ravens seen against a sky background into a single expressive shape, and does the same for a transformer in high-voltage transmission lines. Everything turns into a sign, every sign comes to life in his pictures. The construction worker in a street sign becomes the city's nightly guardian. The shod women's feet on a billboard hover in front of the camera, and so do the passers-by walking the crowded streets. The father, mother and son in the last picture look like mere signs, as do the schoolgirls in the poster embodying Japanese male fantasies. The artificial sweets arranged on a restaurant table come across as the perfect still life. It is as if Stefan Banz was mainly out to discover and capture cracks and

crevices. But that would be putting it too harshly. More accurately, the city wanderer's gaze fills the things that cross his path with momentary life, revealing an unseen side for the duration of a camera's click before sinking back into the half-light of daily routine. The photographer makes us see with his own very personal gaze, he places us into the line of sight faced by two railway engine drivers plunging forward, he has his gaze fall on a maze of buildings or an empty car park, allows it to rest on objects or to frame people sleeping or dreaming away amid all the hubbub. In Stefan Banz's work, Tokyo comes to life in the same way as the sun awakens the Paris of the Impressionists. Everything is tinged with a dash of tender irony and melancholy, a quality that already characterised the atmosphere of his earlier photographs.

This fleetingness, this extraordinary magic of the gaze is what distinguishes this picture book from everything we have seen of Tokyo to date. Here, the city of Nobuyoshi Araki is not in the ruthless grip of Eros and Thanatos. Not every fruit must be a vulva or a penis. The perfection and order regulating the surface of social life do not need their counterpart in obsessive humiliations. The tradition of Zen, samurai and kimonos is not fighting a losing battle against the culture of the devastators of Hiroshima. The city is not in need of a violent mise-en-scène to show its true face, and bondage is not the key to its mystery. Nor is it necessary to have the camera place its subjects on a stage in the way Beat Streuli, the certified portrayer of metropolitan dwellers, likes to do. It is the innocence of his budding love that saves Stefan Banz from resorting to any kind of intrusiveness. His camera delicately approaches the zone where the aura of the city's body begins. Nothing is further from his mind than to grab it by its extremities and to force it into a pose.

Nevertheless, Stefan Banz, too, arranges his impressions into a composition. Right at the beginning, he shows us, in the sea of balloons in white and blue, a tender twig, a bough of nature amid the artificial egg shapes, which will be remembered as we turn a few pages to see bright green foliage fill the page, its light-flooded fullness making us realise how precious nature is in this country, how much it is revered and its general lack made all the more noticeable by the many gardens. Colours and stories spontaneously transform themselves into one another. He has the blue of the sky and the twilight gradually shade over into the brightness of the advertising signs, he sees a counterpart to the thronging people in the sea of buildings, he finds crowds to harbour people and groups that recede to become shadows, models, accessories and cult objects, until they resurface as comic-book and advertising images incorporated into the realm of signs. The city, its people and images thus combine to produce a portrait that remains open, that makes us feel that we may see them in a different light next time.

Translated by Simon Lenz

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